CHAPTER 15

Educating Students to Think, Feel and Behave Democratically: Study Hall Educational Foundation (SHEF)—A Magical Space of Possibility

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In August 1947, India threw off the colonial yoke and became independent. On 26 January 1950, we enacted, adopted and gave to ourselves a constitution, declaring ourselves a democratic republic. Our constitution, one of the finest in the world, holds as its core values equality, liberty and fraternity. Seventy-two years later, in 2022, our country is still struggling to achieve its constitutional promise of democracy. Patriarchy is still firmly intact. I have borne the brunt of it in my own life, as described later. India, ranking 140 on the gender gap index ("WEFs Gender Gap Index: India Slips 28 Places, Ranks 140 Among 156 Nations," 2021), has a female workforce participation rate of just 21% (Misra & Saha, 2021). The literacy rate for women in India is only 65.46%, while for men it is 82.14% (*Profile—Literacy—Know India: National Portal of India*, 2021). India

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has recorded an average of eighty murders of women and seventy-seven rape cases daily in 2020 according to the National Crime Records Bureau report. In India, only 13.3% of Members of Parliament and 8% of Members of Legislative Assemblies are women (Radhakrishnan, 2019). Though our constitution abolished untouchability, caste-driven discrimination of many kinds still abounds; a scheduled caste (SC) person faced crime every ten minutes in India, cumulating to a total of 50,291 cases registered in 2020, an increase of 9.4% from the previous year, according to data from the National Crime Records Bureau (Jyoti, 2021).

Our democratic republic is still ridden with feudal practices and mindsets, especially in the area of gender and caste. We are trying to build a democratic country with feudal mindsets! No wonder we are in trouble. While our founding parents gave us a great constitution, they did not take the next critical step—educating our population for democracy. It was a great opportunity to deconstruct feudal mindsets and habits of the mind and build egalitarian, more democratic ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. I believe schools and classrooms are magical spaces of possibility, provided we allow the magic into them.

Our Feudal Inheritance

We were a collection of feudal monarchies before the British colonized us. A feudal monarchy themselves, they only reinforced our feudal system. We also inherited our public school system from them. Far from being democratic spaces, schools, like all our other public institutions and corporations, were structured hierarchically, with power being clearly held by the teachers and administrators. Learning was examination-driven, and a top-down, rote learning–based pedagogy was practiced. Despite several policy changes and three National Education Policies (1968, 1986 and 2020), which were all (especially the most recent one in 2020) eloquent about democratic ways of teaching and learning and prescribed learner-centric pedagogies, the situation on the ground tells quite another story. Whereas the public school system, which serves about 50% of the school-going population,[1] is very broken with extremely poor learning outcomes—only 50.8% of children in third grade could read first grade level text (ASER, 2019)—the private school system includes a vast range of schools in terms

[1] The percentage of students attending government schools has declined steadily from 2012–2013 when it was 57.3%.

of quality, economic structure and fees, from a few dollars a month to hundreds, and so serves lower- and middle-income families as well as the wealthy.[2] Barring the very small number of elite schools or innovative NGO-run schools, most schools continue to be extremely undemocratic in terms of both structure and pedagogy.

Study Hall Educational Foundation (SHEF): Why It Was Born

I am a daughter of refugees. They were refugees from what became Pakistan—because they are Hindus and it was not safe to continue living there. Fearing for their lives, both my parents had to flee along with their families, separately, leaving their homes behind when India was cruelly partitioned by the British, in 1947. They were married on 30 January 1948, the same day that Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated! My mother was sixteen and my father was twenty. At fourteen, my father lost his father and then was forced to abandon his schooling in order to don the patriarchal mantle of the family head. At eighteen, my father was orphaned and rendered homeless at twenty. I was the daughter of a strong patriarch. My father settled in Pune, which was more than 1500 km away from his land of birth and equally distant and strange in terms of language and culture. Trying to find his own moorings in an alien place and culture, he clung to his own tenaciously and raised me with strict standards, "appropriate for girls and women." I was to be an obedient, devoted wife, a good mother and a dutiful daughter-in-law. Education did not play an important role in this plan for me. As my family grew in wealth and status, I was sent to a high-quality private girls' convent school, as was the practice for girls of my social class. Though academically sound, the school was conservative in its pedagogical and philosophical approach—our school motto was "I serve." I graduated from my school in 1970 at the top of my class and was sent to an all-girls Home Science college, much against my wishes. One year into the college, a suitable boy was found for me and I was engaged

[2] As of 2020, the percentage of private schools in India was 22.4% while they serve 37.1% (9% in 1993) of the school-going population. According to a survey by Schoolnet in 2022, Indian parents spend approximately Rs 8000 per year on school tuition fees in government schools and Rs 27,000 if their child is studying in a private unaided school. A family with a monthly income of Rs 20,000–50,000 might pay Rs 2000–10,000 a month on private school tuition fees.

at the age of seventeen, married soon after and shipped off 1000 km away to Lucknow, with an incomplete college education to a city which was culturally very different from the one I grew up in and, most importantly, where I knew NO ONE.

I managed to home-school my way to a college degree and later to a master's degree because I was determined to have an education. I also became a mother to two lovely daughters, who sadly received a very lukewarm welcome, because a boy was expected and preferred. Reluctantly, but determinedly, I tried to be the good wife, mother and daughter that I was raised to be. In August 1982, the tragic suicide/murder of my younger cousin, also educated in the same school as mine, ripped my comfortable, traditionally "safe" world apart. She was burnt to death in her own home, most likely by her own husband and in-laws, though it was passed off as a suicide. Shocked and bewildered, I could not sit and do nothing. I started an organization to help women in distress called Suraksha. In the course of my work, I began to conduct awareness workshops with young girls in schools and colleges. It was in dialogue with them that I realized how disconnected their education was from the reality of their life and how little it prepared them to navigate its gendered terrain—JUST like my own education! Like my cousin and me, they were shortchanged by their education, which gave them many academic skills, but did not give them the important knowledge that they had the right to use this education to become the drivers of their own lives. I began to think critically about my own education and my own life, and this is how I began my journey as an educator and as a feminist.

I began to read about alternative schools, thinkers and proponents of alternative education like J. Krishnamurthi, Rabindranath Tagore and John Dewey, among others. My inquiry led me to the Krishnamurti School in Varanasi, where I met Ahalya Chari, an educator, who befriended me and encouraged me to start a school. I reared back in alarm, "NO! That's too big an undertaking! And I'm not qualified—no education degree!" "But you have all the right questions!" she replied encouragingly.

A couple of years later, in January 1986, very nervously, Study Hall School was born in my garage with six children. Armed with my question—"What is an education that will respond to the learners' needs and life? Enable and help them to live their lives joyfully, respectfully and successfully?"—I set about learning from the children, even though they were just three years old, and from the teachers. My own ignorance and absence of a formal degree in education proved to be a boon. There was

nothing to unlearn, and I was willing to start from scratch. I looked very attentively at the children. What did they want to learn, and how did they want to learn? I wrote the school charter a year later and the first line reads, "*Children are unique, powerful, important persons, worthy of our respect. They have a right to enjoy their childhood, which is an important phase of their lives in itself and deserves to be understood respectfully rather than treated simply as a preparation for adulthood.*" This recognition of children's rights in education was our first step away from the feudal conception of education. It affected a power shift in the traditional hierarchy, away from the teacher to the child, and led to a more egalitarian construction of the classroom and consequently of teaching and learning.

Fast Forward to 2022

Today, Study Hall Education Foundation (SHEF) has transformed 1040 schools, trained 100,000 teachers, impacted the lives of 5,000,000 children and reached out to 20,000,000 community members, through its network of schools, teacher training programs, community-based learning centers and partnership with government schools. Our vision reads thus: To educate everyone for gender equality, social justice, personal flourishing and active democratic citizenship!

Born out of a democratic urge, with the goal of giving the learner center stage, SHEF has grown into an inclusive, democratic space, for children (ages three onward) and young adults, from all castes, classes and genders, different abilities, from rural and urban neighborhoods in and around Lucknow. We run four formal K-12 schools, with integrated programs for children with special needs, an undergraduate degree college and 148 community-based non-formal learning centers.

How Is SHEF a Democratic Learning Space?

SHEF is democratic in three primary ways. (1) It has a democratic power structure (2) It is inclusive. (3) We have intentionally created curricula and pedagogies that help students think critically about the social and political structures and norms that frame their lives and guide their relationships. We intentionally and deliberately help them deconstruct traditional feudal mental constructs and reconstruct democratic, egalitarian conceptual frameworks instead.

1. *A democratic structure*: From SHEF's very inception we have adopted a very clear *consultative style of leadership*. All policies and decisions are made in full consultation with teachers and students. For example, we decided to abandon the practice of end-of-year exams in our second year, after a series of consultations with the teachers and with due consideration of how our students, still only three to five years old, responded to exams and their absence. There is a distributed power structure. Team leaders have full autonomy in their own units. Teachers have a high degree of liberty to decide their course content within a broad framework and work in groups and teams. Teachers are engaged in ongoing professional development, which again is very participatory in nature. The leadership functions on a strong ethic of care. As Siddharth, one of our young leaders, says: "I have been groomed into caring for everyone at my workplace as one of my own. Care and personal attention have become central to my own style of leadership." We call SHEF a Universe of Care, where everyone should be caring and should feel cared for as a person with intrinsic value.

Voice: Every last person in the organization feels heard. Students elect their own student council to represent them and serve as their voice to the administration. Classes are very interactive and teachers make a special effort to build a close, caring relationship with students. Students are enabled to find their voice and use it to express themselves. One of the "criticisms" aimed at us is that our students are very happy in school, have too much freedom—not disciplined (read obedient) enough—and talk far too much. They have strong opinions on everything and ask too many questions! Parents are encouraged to participate and speak up too. Everyone has easy access to the leadership, who is expected to be available and responsive. As one of the teachers comments, "Here, first it's about empowering the child, teaching them how to speak up [have a voice] and not stay silent, having an understanding of what's right and wrong, and being alert about their rights." Khushboo, an alumna, talks about the personal and social impact of finding her voice: "So, I am empowered, I want that [for other girls]. However far my voice can go, if there is any girl, anywhere, who wants to speak up, raise her voice, by hearing my story she can learn that she can also change her life, like I did, and go forward."

2. *We are an inclusive organization*: We have intentionally reached out to students from all classes, castes, religions, genders and abilities. We understand and practice inclusion by centering students' lived experiences and ensuring that everyone feels a sense of belonging—a feeling "at home." We are the leading school with a fully integrated program for learners with different abilities. We also invite and organize parental engagement and participation regularly.
3. *The use of critical pedagogies (critical feminist pedagogy in particular)*: This is pervasive in our entire organization with students, their parents and teachers. I believe this critical pedagogy is our unique and most innovative offering to education. We believe that lessons of equality are just as important as lessons of science, math and language. We have developed curricula to enable critical dialogues and discussions around gender for boys and girls and around caste for people of all castes (in progress at the time of writing). Critical dialogues are a regular part of our official curriculum. We have special classes for these every week, and they also pervade other subject classes. Critical pedagogy is used for all subjects. Furthermore, these curricula have emerged as a result of a democratic process—from dialogues with students. It was born out of dialogues with students from our Prerna School (part of our SHEF network)—a school for very marginalized girls—mostly Dalits and poor, 50% of them forced to work in order to supplement family incomes. We work with students first and develop the curricula based on the conversations with them. This makes them co-creators of the curricula.

Apart from our critical dialogues, which are embedded in the performing and visual arts, our schools practice a critical pedagogy in all our classrooms, where students are encouraged to bring in their lived worlds into the classroom and make their learning relevant to their lives, by sharing stories from their lives and making these the context in which they learn other content also. We center these dialogues around four main issues: class, caste (race), gender and secularism. For example, seventh grade students in Study Hall, which caters to middle-class urban children mostly, were asked to measure and derive the area of their own bedroom and derive the person per square foot ratio. They were also asked to do this for one of their Prerna friend's homes. They then discussed their findings in class during their critical dialogues, where many questions about class inequality and their own unearned privilege were raised and discussed.

This helped them understand a lived inequality between their lives and those of their poorer friends empathetically—the centerpiece of critical dialogue.

In these contexts, students are empowered to ask critical questions such as: "Who am I and how am I related to the universe and others in it?" Throughout their learning, students seek answers. Moni, an alumna of our Prerna school, speaks to this: *"I feel I can now become someone, anyone I want to be. I have learned I can fight for my rights. I learned in school that I have the right to take decisions about my life. Today I have convinced my parents that I can make my own decisions. Now they discuss things with me. Society is like a wall for girls. It does not let us do anything, doesn't let us grow. I know now that this is unfair and society should change, let us progress, hear us. I have learned that I can speak up when I see something wrong and I have the confidence to do that." Mona's words reflect what I believe is the main purpose of education.*

These critical dialogues and our critical pedagogy are key to developing democratic habits of the mind in our students, teachers and parents. Being able to think critically is one of the key intellectual qualities required of democratic citizens, without which we cannot have robust democracies. It is only a democratic political system that allows people the freedom to engage in critical conversation. This being said, a democracy also requires its citizens to have the skills needed for them to function as autonomous equal persons. We must educate our youth accordingly, failing which we fail not just our students but also democracy. I describe our critical feminist pedagogy in the following section, with specific reference to our Prerna School, where it was born and is used with great impact.

Critical feminist pedagogy: This pedagogy aims to raise girls' critical consciousness of oppressive social norms, power structures and the gender relations that impact them. This approach enables students to "name" their condition in a patriarchal world, to see how it is historically and socially constructed, therefore contrary to popular belief, not natural or God-given, and to imagine an alternative self and life in a newly possible egalitarian social order and, most important, work toward realizing it.

In a discussion on domestic violence with eighth grade girls, they were split up into small groups and asked to present an improv drama of what domestic violence looked like in their homes. They presented various scenarios—some of them showing physical abuse of mothers by their fathers; others showed emotional violence caused by refusing them free movement and enough food and denial of education. After this, we discussed each

scenario, to see what was really going on. In the discussion around the father abusing his wife, the teacher asks the students, "And did the mother retaliate?" The students laughed self-consciously, responding almost with one voice, "Of course not!" The teacher probed further, "And why not?" "Because our society doesn't allow it." "A wife can't hit her husband." "Even if she is being beaten?" the teacher asked. "Yes! It's just not considered right for a woman." The discussion then turned to why that was the case. Who was "society" and who made these rules? And were these rules fixed in stone? How fair were they? Could they not be changed? The teacher tells the students about the law against domestic violence and how it is recognized as a crime. The students are led in this way to think of solutions to the problem. How can this change? Who can change what? The teacher's role is to ask difficult questions and help students arrive at their own understanding of the situation and the inherent power dynamic, finally imagining an alternative one.

While a strong focus on gender equality and justice permeates all the curricular and extracurricular activities, weekly special empowerment classes are included as part of the official curriculum. During these classes, girls learn to examine the systemic discrimination and oppression they face and are empowered or learn to act individually and collectively, to become self-advocates and to challenge unfair social structures. We believe girls must acquire this important knowledge if their education is to succeed in helping them achieve better life outcomes (Sahni, 2017).[3]

Impact on our girls: Our girls from Prerna have been empowered to view themselves as equal autonomous persons and to act accordingly. Prerna Girls School's retention rate is 95% (according to the data shared by the Indian education ministry in 2019, the national average for retention rate at the higher secondary level in government schools was only 40.17%) (Krishna, 2021), and 92% of Prerna graduates have transitioned to higher education (the gross enrollment ratio in higher education in India was only 27.1% in 2019) (Kalita, 2021). They have become decision-makers in their own homes and role models for other girls in the community. Several of them have managed to delay their marriages and have become entrepreneurs, and are running their own businesses, middle-level executives, lawyers and more. They have also carried the message forward into their communities.

[3] For a more detailed account please see my book: Sahni, U. (2017). *Reaching for the Sky: Empowering Girls Through Education*. Brookings Institution Press.

We also conduct monthly meetings with parents and hold similar critical dialogues with them. This is our effort to deconstruct feudal, patriarchal mindsets in parents too, so that they may become allies in their daughters' struggle for an autonomous life as an equal person. We do face opposition from our parents in this, though not as much as one would imagine. One of our students' fathers lashed out at his daughter Khushboo, as she was defying him when he wanted to marry her off, while she wanted to finish her high school education: "It's this education that has given you these teeth of rebellion." Khushboo did prevail and today she has a master's degree and earns her own living. Over the years, not only has our enrollment grown steadily from 80 students in the first year to 1100 in 2022, but due to the persistent efforts of our teachers and alumni, more and more fathers are taking an active interest in their daughters' education. It is possible that part of the reason for our success might be that parents, especially fathers, do not fully realize the subversive potential of our critical pedagogy.

Working with boys: We realize that our mission to achieve gender equality through education is incomplete without working with boys. In the last seven years we have used our critical feminist pedagogy with boys too. Our message during our critical dialogues is very clear: "Boys, while patriarchy is not your fault, it gives you unfair power and privilege and is very cruel to your mothers, your sisters and all the women you love. It also lays undue pressure on you. So what can you do to change how you live and behave as boys and men and how you relate with the women in your life?" We work with boys to deconstruct their patriarchal socialization, build empathy in them and a sense of fairness, and encourage them to become advocates for their sisters' rights, to help in the domestic chores at home equally with them and to develop a respectful perception of women as equal persons. Though this transformation is more challenging and takes longer than it does with girls, we have achieved very encouraging results. Interestingly, we have received pushback from mothers. One mother stormed into the principal's office, " I don't want you to tell my son he should do housework! He will not do this menial work! That is his sisters' duty!" We take this as an opportunity to talk to the mother and have a critical dialogue with her. Often it does work—and sometimes it takes many such conversations. We have found, though, that our students are the best advocates as they take their class dialogues to their homes, continuing these discussions with their families. We also have specific activities to facilitate these discussions at home: for example, "interview your

mothers/fathers," and "discuss with your parents and see how they feel and think about higher education for girls."

SHEF's India's Daughters Campaign: "*We think we should share with other girls and women and our larger community what we have got from our education. We have become strong and can resist, fight, but others can't. They haven't learnt to think like us. So what can we do? We want to do something.*"—Laxmi, an alumna of Prerna.

What began as a series of student-led critical dialogues in people's homes in 2011 has become a full-blown public awareness and advocacy campaign, which we call India's Daughters Campaign. Our students and alumna go house to house advocating for girls' rights, run signature campaigns, march in the community and perform street plays to engage the community in dialogue about issues like child marriage, domestic violence, toxic masculinity and women's citizenship. India's Daughters Campaign over the last decade has been able to engage over 2500 schools, raise 500,000 children and reach over 2 million community members and also has been successful in getting the buy-in of 8600 government officials. This social action has had a great impact on our students: "This really made me feel my voice counts. I count. People in Guari *Gaon* (an urban village) have taken note of this movement; they have taken note of us. They think of us as persons who they can turn to for help and persons who can effect change. No one, especially not school girls, has done this before—asked them these kinds of (hard) questions, or listened to them," Sunita, one of the student leaders of the campaign, says.

Their parents have begun to perceive them similarly. Our continuous engagement with parents has led to the democratizing of their families as well. One father said, "I know I have changed. Daughters in my family were married at a very early age, but I won't do that. I will let my daughters study and make something of their lives." One of the mothers said, "Because of this school, I have seen change in my family and in my neighborhood. People's mentality is changing."

We work with mothers, helping them to construct a self-image of themselves as citizens with equal rights. Our message is very clear—in a patriarchal society like India, it is only their identity as a citizen that gives them equal status, not their religion, not their society and certainly not their families. One mother said, "We have learnt to speak up against violence. The atmosphere of my house has changed."

In Conclusion

We view the building of a democratic identity in our students—both boys and girls—and parents as a critical responsibility of our organization. This is done formally through the official curricula and pedagogies, but even more importantly through the democratic school culture that pervades the learning ecosystem. Students learn to be democratic because they experience a democratic learning space. They experience what it feels like to function in a diverse inclusive setting with others from very different cultural and economic backgrounds. They learn to navigate a diverse terrain and become more accepting and respectful of differences. They discuss equality regularly and understand it and develop egalitarian habits of the mind and heart. They learn to develop a strong voice and to use it to protest, to question, to critique and to participate in the conversations of their times. They learn to become democratic citizens and hopefully leaders too.

I believe that educators and educational organizations like SHEF have a key responsibility to help achieve fully functioning democracies. Education is a powerful social and individual transformative force, *provided* it is transformed. Our curricula and pedagogy should shift their focus from a transfer of decontextualized, depersonalized academic skills and content toward a focus on the social, emotional and political problems and issues of our times. Math, science, history, geography and language can all be taught in the context of these. Classrooms come alive when students are meaningfully engaged in thinking and imagining solutions for real living issues and problems. Growing up I wish my own school had been like this—engaging us and empowering us with these critical conversations about our lives. I wish our school had focused more on life outcomes and not only on learning outcomes.

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